

Al Walkers' spy case defies parallels

By Bill McKelway
and John Witt
Times-Dispatch staff writers

NORFOLK — It is a tale of espionage that with each day has taken on ever-widening new scenarios, from revelations of melodramatic derring-do and intrigue to alleged worldwide breaches of security that some say threaten the country's most secret defense mechanisms.

"It is one of the most extraordinary espionage cases I've ever seen," one veteran law enforcement officer was quoted as saying by news agencies. "I'm not sure that anybody can really predict when it's going to end."

At the eye of this sudden storm of concern is a bespectacled, toupee Navy veteran from Norfolk named John A. Walker Jr., 47, currently being held in a Baltimore jail. Walker, an unflappable go-getter whom his fondly wrote of as JAWS, allegedly headed a spy network that for almost two decades may have fed the Soviet Union a steady diet of top-secret information.

"Walker passed information to Soviet intelligence agents by using 'dead drops' in the Washington, D.C., area, every three months or so," a federal affidavit released by the FBI alleged last week. During his 21-year Navy career, which ended in 1976, Walker attained the rank of chief warrant officer and served as a communications specialist with a "top-secret-crypto" clearance.

Since Walker's arrest at 3 a.m. May 20 in a Rockville, Md., motel, after which federal agents discovered secret documents in his possession showing recent ship move-

RICHMOND TIMES-DISPATCH (VA)

9 June 1985

ments in the Mediterranean, a federal investigation has shown that Walker's alleged network penetrated the inner workings of the Navy's most sophisticated communications systems and tracked the paths of some of its most closely guarded warships.

In quick succession, federal agents arrested and charged with espionage Walker's 22-year-old son, Michael, a seaman aboard the aircraft carrier Nimitz; then Walker's brother Arthur, 50, a retired Navy lieutenant commander and submarine expert from Virginia Beach, who later worked for a Tidewater defense contractor and allegedly has admitted his role in the espionage operation; and last week, Jerry Alfred Whitworth, 45, a Davis, Calif., Navy veteran who once wrote to John Walker that he had become chief in charge of "tech control" at the Alameda Naval Air station near Oakland, Calif.

It was a position that placed him, he said, at "the heart of naval communications," according to a federal affidavit filed last week in San Francisco.

The defendants face maximum sentences of life in prison if convicted.

Fears about the extent of the alleged espionage effort have quickly spread among top representatives of the nation's intelligence community and Congress.

"The numbers of people who have clearances is too large and we are going to cut that down," Secretary of Defense Casper Weinberger told the New York Times, echoing a growing sentiment that the number of people — about four million — in this country with access to classified military information has become unmanageable.

"I think there are very serious losses that went on over a long period of time," Weinberger said of Walker's alleged operation.

CIA Director William Casey was quoted yesterday in U.S. News & World Report as saying "these people were in a position to acquire and put together a great deal of information which we very much want to keep away from the Soviets — information which they could find very useful."

While John Walker's access to information at first appeared to depend on his son's ability to stow away box-loads of secret documents from the

Nimitz, further investigation has shown a relationship with Whitworth that began in the early 1970s and was worldwide in scope.

The federal affidavit filed in San Francisco refers to documents recovered from Walker's Norfolk home that "indicate that Walker rendezvoused with his Soviet contact" in 1977 in Hong Kong when Whitworth was stationed on the carrier Constellation there. Other documents, according to the affidavit, show that Walker met separately with Whitworth and Soviet agents at scheduled meetings in Vienna, Austria, and the Philippines.

Whitworth, who has lived in a mobile home park since his retirement from the Navy two years ago and is unemployed, considered several new job opportunities. In a note found in Walker's home, Whitworth allegedly wrote, "I plan to make myself known to a larger (illegible) of government and civilian organizations just to see what is out there, an example: CIA."

A CIA spokesman refused last week to say whether any of the Walkers or Whitworth had applied for work with the agency.

Named a "Hometown Hero" a year ago this month by a Norfolk television station for his work in locating missing children, in public John Walker cultivated the image of a conservative zealot while directing his alleged espionage network with patient, detached control.

"I realize this doesn't fit in with your advice and counseling over the years," Whitworth wrote Walker when the California man contemplated ending his "professional" relationship with Walker, according to FBI documents. "Your help has been rewarding and I greatly appreciate all that you've done for me in the past."

In a letter allegedly intended for his Soviet contact, Walker wrote that Whitworth "continues to be a puzzle."

"He is not happy, but is still not ready to continue our cooperation . . . My guess . . . He is going to flop in the stockbroker field and can probably make a modest living in computer sales. He has become accustomed to the big spender lifestyle and I don't believe he will adjust to living off his wife's income. He will attempt to renew cooperation within two years."

Walker joined the John Birch Society in South Carolina in the mid-1960s

and befriended former Ku Klux Klan leader Bill Wilkinson, sharing, Wilkinson said, a mutual dislike of Communists. The two men were communications specialists together aboard the nuclear submarine Simon Bolivar.

In 1979, according to former Walker associate Roberta K. Puma, Walker threw a party for Wilkinson when he visited Tidewater Virginia.

"There were lots of law enforcement people there," said Ms. Puma, who said she once helped Walker "drop" classified documents near the Maryland location where he was arrested last month. "I remember a friend of mine arguing the KKK credo and tenets with Wilkinson."

As early as 1966, when Walker purchased for \$60,000 5 acres of land and a frame building in the Charleston, S.C., suburb of Ladson, he first established himself as an enterprising businessman.

"He lived there in the back with his wife and his two little daughters," recalled Edgar Craven, 78, who lives beside the structure. "He turned it into a beer hall. Called it the Bamboo."

"It was definitely your basic red-neck sort of joint," said Berkeley County Police Chief G.J. Miller. "White socks and Pabst Blue Ribbon."

When Walker was transferred by the Navy, he left management of the beer hall to others. About three years ago, Miller said, the building became the meeting place for a Veterans of Foreign Wars post. "You might say those fellows are a bit concerned now," Miller said.

The business also marked an early example of how Walker, according to former business partner Charles H. Smith, "always seemed to have plenty of cash."

Smith, a home improvement contractor in Virginia Beach, said that shortly before his retirement from the Navy in 1976, Walker "got ripped off" for \$10,000 when he invested in a business called the Virginia Association of Professional Salesmen Inc.

Smith and Walker later took over the business and changed the name, Smith said. He said the organization, which operated out of a prestigious Norfolk professional office building, offered \$35 memberships to salespeople who would get special insurance policies and reduced prices for various services.

Smith said the business never made any money, "but Johnny put at least \$50,000 into it," he said. The business folded after the state questioned procedures the company used to franchise similar organizations outside Tidewater.

State records also show that Walker and his brother Arthur started a business selling car radios and electronic equipment in the late 1970s, but a lawyer for the company said it folded because of financial problems.

Walker, meanwhile, began doing security work for the Wackenhut Corp. and in 1980 began to set up a series of private detective agencies.

"The guy was full-throttle all the way. He was a complete renegade," said Michael Bell, once a supervisor of Walker's who now is associated with a private detective agency in Richmond.

Walker's detective agencies, which boasted dozens of licensed investigators, concentrated on investigations of insurance claims, divorce cases, and missing children, and performed "de-bugging" work for various corporate clients.

His operating methods inspired comment. Walker disguised himself at various times as a priest, a Boy Scout leader, a bird watcher and a representative of a fictitious televi-

sion cable company he called Cosmic Cable.

Search warrants filed after his arrest turned up a knife-ejecting walking stick, among other exotic weapons, and thousands of dollars worth of electronic surveillance equipment.

"He acted as though life's a game," said Shirley Kirkes, who took investigative classes from Walker. "You pit your intelligence against the other fellow and see who wins. He told us how to use disguises and said you had to learn everything about the person you were investigating."

"I admired him for his sort of plodding, methodical ways, his intelligence. I thought he was daring in a way," she said.

Over the years, Walker bought property in the Bahamas, in North Carolina, and in Tidewater. Despite his occasional business setbacks, he owned a houseboat, a sailboat, a single-engine airplane, and a home in Norfolk whose value Walker listed in a federal financial statement at \$70,000.

Last week, the Internal Revenue Service seized the Virginia property and filed liens against the South and North Carolina properties. The government claims Walker owes more than \$250,000 in taxes dating back to 1979.

As the case against Walker builds, federal investigators have been aided by Walker's own meticulousness. Search warrants turned up detailed records of correspondence with alleged accomplices and foreign agents dating back to the mid-1960s.

But it was a soured marriage of 19 years, ending in 1976, that appears to have fatally pierced what intelligence experts say was perhaps the most sophisticated spy network in Navy history, one that the FBI says was motivated by greed.

After years of concern over possible repercussions for the couple's four children, Walker's former wife, Barbara Crowley Walker, decided in November to disclose her knowledge of the alleged espionage activities to federal agents.

"[John] had a real knack for destroying people who loved him and using them," Mrs. Walker told the Cape Cod Times last week. "I want him punished. How can a father do this? He used his own son. If what they say is true, he's lucky he's in jail because I would kill him."